

UGR Mission Feeds Troops in the Field

By Doug Imberi, DDJC Public Affairs

Playing a major role in the care and feeding of troops in the field is the Unitized Group Ration (UGR), a meal built at Defense Distribution Depot San Joaquin, CA (DDJC). The UGR is designed to simplify and streamline the process of providing meals in the field by integrating the components of heat-and-serve rations with quickly prepared, brand name commercial products.

The intent of the UGR concept is to consolidate everything needed to prepare 50 meals in one unit. Commercial items such as sauces and mixes are used to reduce preparation time in the field. The UGR greatly reduces the need to handle rations several times.

Until three years ago, the meals were called Tray Packs, named after the metal trays containing the meal's entree. The trays remained, however, they are now plastic. The plastic trays can be opened with little effort and are easy to reseal for leftovers. The modules have grown from a single box with food for 18 soldiers to three boxes that feed 50.



Packers Mike Zambrano, left, and Roger Snyder, build Unitized Group Rations. Zambrano puts paper plates to the boxes while Snyder adds trays containing the meal's main course.

Inside the modules you'll find a main course, and large, cafeteria-size cans of vegetables, desserts, and fruit. These items change according to 14 dinner and 7 breakfast menus. In addition, each module will contain a bottle of hot sauce, a powdered drink, coffee, paper trays and cups, dining packets with plastic utensils, napkins, salt and pepper. A trash bag is included to clean up afterwards.

The ingredients used to build the modules come in every day and are ordered by the item manager, Defense Supply Center, Philadelphia (DSCP). On average five to six trucks arrive daily full of food items destined for the UGRs.

Supervising the UGR mission at DDJC is Lue Seawood. Seawood is in constant touch with DSCP, who determines how many meals will have to be made based on what the Army and Marines have planned for field exercises.

Seawood runs down a long list of scenario's that requires DSCP notification. "If we have trouble with a truck bringing in

a shipment, if the inspectors find something wrong with a food item, if we have to shut down an assembly line," noted Seawood. "Everyday I'm talking to them, sometimes twice a day, sometimes all day."

Ensuring the wholesomeness of the food is a group of veterinarians, members of the Army's Veterinary Command. They examine the food products to make sure there are no leaks, check shelf life, and take random samples of items to make sure the contents are fit to eat. "The vets will shut down a line if they find defects," Seawood said.

Containers can be damaged with holes or seams that are not completely sealed and this quality assurance is critical to ensuring the warfighter is getting a good product.

The UGR mission has two assembly lines, which allows them to change menus quickly. When they get an order to build one of the meals, the ingredients are selected the day before and staged near the assembly line. While one line is finishing up the previous menu, the other line is getting stocked with ingredients for a new meal.

Depending on the menu, the assembly line takes between 14 and 21 personnel to staff. The line starts with an automated box maker taking a flat piece of cardboard and folding it into a box. The operation doesn't end until a completed pallet is covered in shrink-wrapped plastic and put in storage.

In between are a whole lot of steps with people adding cans of vegetables, entrees, desserts, coffee, utensils and all the other items it takes for a complete meal in the field. At the same time, each person staffing a station is doing a quality check to ensure the right ingredients are in each box.

Seawood ensures that all the pertinent information such as lots, contract numbers and dates of pack are entered into the computer in case any item is recalled after production.

If there is a recall, it only takes Seawood about an hour to tell DSCP where the items were shipped. Back in the mid 1990's, before a computer database was established, it could take days to research files.



Jon Clemans, left, and Ken Barry add 10-pound cans of vegetables to the Unitized Group Rations.